

CHAPTER 1: HISTORY OF EAST ACTON VILLAGE AND THE PLANNING AREA

Introduction

Historically, the “East Acton area” was known as extending along Great Road from the Concord town line to the intersection with Main Street. The area has a rich history and is one of the oldest sections of Acton, especially around East Acton Village. From the late 1600s, European settlers (from Concord, MA) began to move into East Acton and develop farms. By the 1730s, an iron forge had been established in the village. A couple of East Acton’s residents played prominent roles on that famous day (April 19, 1775) when it was announced that the Regulars were coming. In the late 1700s / early 1800s, several mills and taverns developed in East Acton. By about the mid to late 1800s (to the early 1900s), the East Acton Village area was thriving with taverns/inns, mills, retailers, residents, a post office, its own school, and a railroad station. One of its several taverns, Wetherbee’s Tavern, was known from as far away as Canada. Then in the early 1900s the village area began to change. Around 1900, East Acton’s school had closed because several of Acton’s schools had been consolidated. Many of the mills ended operations. By 1930, most if not all of the taverns and inns had closed. Around the 1930s and 1940s, the East Acton railroad station and post office also disappeared. During this time, the East Acton Village area still had several businesses and some vibrant and unique enterprises such as an ice business and a hoop business. In the mid 1900s, East Acton transformed into primarily a retail, office, and auto-oriented business area.

The next few pages describe the history of the East Acton Village area in more detail.

1500 – 1619

Prior to 1615, there is evidence that some Massachuset Indians were settled in and around present day Acton. Unfortunately, there is not much known about the Indians. Artifacts indicating native settlements were found southeast of Great Hill, in South Acton. There is also evidence that a permanent Indian village existed around Nagog Pond in 1655. The Indians survived on agriculture and subsistence, fishing, hunting, and gathering. The Indians’ trails later became transportation routes for the European settlers. A major trail/travel route followed Nashoba Brook to Nagog Pond. It was called many names (Groton Road, Littleton Road, Route 2, and the Mohawk Trail), but eventually came to be known as Great Road (Route 2A).

1620 - 1674

Most of Acton, including all of East Acton and East Acton Village, was part of Concord in the 1600s. It was part of a land grant called the “New Grants of Concord” or Concord Villlage. The grant gave the people of Concord full title to the lands. As part of the process, agreements were made with the Indians to purchase the land. European

settlers from Concord began to move into Acton. Records from the early settlers indicated that the Indians were to be reimbursed for shad, salmon, alewife, beaver, and land.

In 1669, Captain Thomas Wheeler leased 260 acres west of Nashoba Brook from Concord and kept cattle for their townspeople on it. Wheeler also built a house. The lease expired in 1690. He was one of the first European settlers in Acton. Unfortunately, all the buildings from the early settlements and farms have disappeared.

1675 – 1774

In the last few years of the 1600s, it was decided to divide and sell the land in Concord Village to the individual proprietors. The first division of Concord Village began in the 1730s. In 1735, Acton became a separate town. Around this time, the area around Nashoba Brook started to see more activity. Approximately 30 acres on both sides of Nashoba Brook with two acres of adjoining meadow was granted in 1728 to John Barker by the Concord Proprietors to set up a forge. About five years later, he added about 20 acres, so together the land would've extended on both sides of Great Road (with a depth of about 600 feet) from Pope Road to about 750 feet north of the Concord and Great Roads intersection. The forge was located at or near the dam around the present location of 127 Concord Road. John Barker Jr.'s house stood just northwest of the Concord and Great Roads intersection. Acton's first cemetery, Woodlawn, was established in 1737 fairly nearby along Concord Road. And in 1755, Mark White Jr.'s received a license to establish a tavern on Great Road (274 Great Road). Additional farms developed, especially near the brook, and farming became the primary activity in East Acton. Mills started to develop too.

1775 - 1829

Joseph Robbins, a captain in the militia who lived on Concord Road (just east of Woodlawn cemetery), was instrumental in the formation of Massachusetts and the country. Furthermore, it was Captain Robbins who that was brought the first alarm in Acton that "the Regulars are coming" on April 19, 1775. Captain Robbins rushed outside and fired three shots to signal to the Acton minutemen and militiamen to report to their captains' homes. It was Captain Robbins's 13 year old son, John, who then mounted a horse and rode off to notify Captain Isaac Davis and Captain Simon Hunt who would be leading the Faulkner company that day. Part of the minutemen's and militiamen's line of march to Concord followed Strawberry Hill Road. There is a stone marker on Concord Road highlighting Captain Robbins and the first alarm given in Acton.

In 1788, John Barker conveyed 12 acres of his land to Captain Joseph Robbins. Captain Robbins, and later his son and grandson, operated the sawmill near the dam on the west bank of Nashoba Brook. Not too long after John Barker sold 12 acres to Robbins, he sold more of his land, and gave the remaining land to his son Samuel who ran a blacksmith shop on the property from approximately 1794 to 1812.

In the 1700s and 1800s, schools were located in different sections of Acton. The first school serving the East Acton area (and North Acton area) was built around 1796 and was located at approximately ____ Great Road. It is believed that the schoolhouse at one time had 80 pupils.

East Acton contains one of the Acton's four "lottery houses" (144 Great Road). The houses were called lottery houses because the money used to build them came from a winning ticket purchased by Acton resident Abel Conant and his neighbors from Harvard University Lotteries in the 1790s. The lottery house at 144 Great Road was John Robbins' house, the same John Robbins who as a boy, alerted the captains of the Regulars coming on April 19, 1775. The house was built around 1799.

In the late 1700s, "Groton Road" (which is known today as "Great Road") was a major route west for mail, coach traffic, and cattle drovers. It was part of the Boston to Groton Stage, inaugurated in 1793 and contained many taverns and inns. In 1794, Daniel White, tavern owner Mark White's Jr.'s son, opened a tavern/inn at what is now Nagog Woods (across from 514 Great Road). Its original name was Pond Tavern, but it later became known as the Lake Nagog Inn. It appears that the White family business shifted down Great Road. Lake Nagog Inn was very successful and was a summer retreat for Bostonians for many years. In 1803, Edward Wetherbee opened a tavern/inn and stagecoach stop (65 Great Road). The tavern's ownership switched hands a few times in the mid-late 1800s, but lasted until 1889. According to a publication from 1890 called *History of Middlesex County* (Hurd), Wetherbee's Tavern was known to the Canada line as a "temporary Mecca of drovers and drivers of baggage-wagons for more than half a century preceding the advent of railroads." In 1828, White's Tavern closed permanently (it had been operating since 1756, but between 1773 and 1790 it was unclear whether it was being used as a tavern/inn), but James Hapgood's Tavern opened (162 Great Road). The White's Tavern building is no longer at 274 Great Road, but the Hapgood's Tavern building still exists at 162 Great Road. It was said (but never confirmed) that Hapgood's Tavern and Wetherbee's Tavern were stops on the Underground Railroad.

1830 - 1869

In 1840, Captain Joseph Robbins' grandson, Elbridge, conveyed 11 acres to Daniel Wetherbee with the rights to take water from the sawmill pond to run a gristmill (at the present location of 94 Great Road). The gristmill was built that year along with a canal whose water fed the mill's machinery. In 1850, Daniel Wetherbee opened a general store at the location of 65 Great Road. Around 1881, Daniel Wetherbee also purchased the sawmill and two acres from Robbins. It was around this time when the East Acton Village area became known as Wetherbee's Mills.

In the 1840s, East Acton and North Acton received their own schoolhouses. The East Acton school house was built out of brick, could hold up to 50 pupils, and was located near the Strawberry Hill Road / Great Road intersection. That schoolhouse was then

followed by a one room wooden schoolhouse built in 1870 near present day ____ Great Road.

1870 - 1914

In 1871, the Lowell and Framingham Railroad (later known as the “Framingham and Lowell” railroad) was established from Concord along Nashoba Brook to North Acton in 1871. State Reformatory nearby in West Concord was also constructed around this time. An East Acton railroad station was built and the railroad was open to passenger and freight traffic. The original railroad station was destroyed by fire and a second station was built nearby (at the northwest corner of the present day Concord and Great Roads intersection and the site of the EAV Green). As a result, of the railroad and Reformatory, a small village, along with a post office developed in East Acton. Residents originally wanted the post office to be called Elmwood, but the name conflicted with an existing village. “Ellsworth” was then chosen as a compromise, and in 1873, the Ellsworth post office was established and the area started to be called Ellsworth Village. Later, more confusion resulted because there was an Ellsworth in Massachusetts and an Ellsworth in Maine, so in 1885 the village area name was changed to East Acton.

During this time, wholesale and retail dealers sold items in East Acton Village such as flour, grain, oil, various kinds of meal, coffee and tea, spices, shorts, boots and shoes, crockery ware, farming tools, plaster, etc. A spur line from the railroad was built to Wetherbee’s grist mill. When this occurred, Wetherbee enlarged the mill buildings. A grist mill and wheel, plaster mill, saw mill, and store house were all in operation in the late 1800s. The saw mill disappeared by 1900 (after almost 100 years in business). Around 1902, the grist mill operation ended and the building was used to grind talc until 1910. The various Wetherbee properties switched hands numerous times until around 1919. The East Acton schoolhouse also closed around this time (1897). According to the *Acton Business Directory* from 1902, however, East Acton was still an active place and contained many other commercial and industrial enterprises. Some of the businesses and businessmen located in East Acton in 1902 included a blacksmith, cattle dealer, an express company, fish seller, ice dealer (hence the name, “Ice House Pond”), two justices of the peace, a realtor, market gardeners, milk dealers, a painter, and a wheelwright.

1915 - 1949

In the 1900s, regional autohighways started to be constructed along the Colonial roads. Great Road was one of these autohighways and it was called Route 2 and the Mohawk Trail. There were still multiple taverns and inns along the route. For example, the site of Wetherbee’s Tavern (65 Great Road) which closed in 1889, reopened as the Red Robbin Inn for some time after 1917. Lake Nagog Inn was a popular stop or destination along the route, but after 135 years in business, it closed its doors and was later demolished in 1970 to make way for a condominium development (Beth Circle).

On November 26, 1938, the East Acton railroad station closed. During its existence, the stations and the two tracks saw much rail traffic. The stations served the Framingham and Lowell railroad and the Nashua, Acton and Boston railroad on the same track in East Acton (the second railroad serving from North Acton to Middlesex Junction – near the Concord reformatory). The second track (closer to Great Road) came after the first track and ran from Concord Junction to Lowell. One of the tracks also served the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. The railroad made for three booming businesses in North and East Acton: quarried stone, cucumbers, and hoops. The Brooks family on the corner of Strawberry Hill and Great Roads produced thousands of hoops. Hoops are strips of birch used to make citrus fruit crates. Tons of hoops were shipped to Florida. There was also another interesting and/or unique business operation in the 1900s in East Acton. In 1920, Nelson H. Tenney built a hydro-electric plant on the former Robbins/Wetherbee sawmill site in an attempt to use the water power to provide Acton with inexpensive electricity. Tenney's hydro-electric plant was converted into a residence in 1945. During the same time as the plant, a more familiar name and business to present day Actonians came into being. Bursaw Oil Company obtained the former Wetherbee gristmill site and began operations.

1950 +

In 1950, the new Route 2 was constructed. Great Road then became Route 2A. East Acton started to become less of a tourist area and place of manufacturing and evolved into primarily a retail area.

Several of East Acton's historically and/or architecturally significant structures stand today. The list below provides the names, locations, and a brief description of the historically and/or architecturally significant structures and sites in the East Acton Village area.